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SUBJECT: JAMAICA: BRUCE GOLDING'S OPPOSITION LABOUR PARTY (JLP) WINS CLOSEST ELECTION IN NATIONAL HISTORY

REF: (A) KINGSTON 1325 (011622Z SEP 07)

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Summary  
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1.(SBU) After 18 years in opposition, Bruce Golding's Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) appears to have won the closest race in the country's volatile political history against the charismatic Prime Minister (PM) Portia Simpson Miller (PSM)'s ruling People's National Party (PNP). A final official recount of votes should be completed no later than September 6; however, all signs point toward a new JLP government with a razor-thin parliamentary majority.

2.(SBU) Throughout her long career, PSM has capitalized on magnetic charisma and populist appeal as the "mother of the nation." However, since winning a bitter internecine party struggle to succeed the outgoing P.J. Patterson as PNP Leader and PM in March, 2006, she has seen her support gradually dwindle. The narrow victory of Golding's JLP represents a sea change in Jamaica's political direction. End Summary.

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A true Cliff-hanger:  
Recount reportedly shifts at least one marginal seat  
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3.(SBU) Jamaica's 2007 election will be remembered as the closest political contest the country has seen since the introduction of universal suffrage in 1944. Based on the preliminary count and partial recount of all votes cast, after 18 years in opposition Bruce Golding's Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) won 32 of 60 parliamentary seats, while Prime Minister (PM) Portia Simpson Miller (PSM)'s ruling People's National Party captured 28. This marks the first time in over four decades that a ruling party has lost with a voter turnout of less than 70 percent. (Comment: The low voter turnout may explain the JLP's less than impressive showing relative to recent projections. End Comment.)

4.(SBU) In eight of the 60 constituencies, the outcomes were razor-thin, by margins between 46 and 404 votes; of these eight, the PNP won the five closest: Southeast St. Mary (46), Western Hanover (47), Eastern Hanover (57), St. James South (196), and Central Manchester (207). Thus, adjustments to the final allocation of seats as a result of the official recount by the Electoral Commission of Jamaica (ECJ)-now underway, to be complete no later than September 6- appear more likely to favor the JLP than the PNP. Indeed, at midday September 4, the ECJ reportedly confirmed that the recount already had shifted the St. James South seat to the JLP's Noel Donaldson.

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PSM: Rage, rage, against the dying of the light?  
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5.(SBU) After an unusually lengthy campaign, prolonged in the aftermath of Hurricane Dean (reftels A,B), on Election Day most voters appeared glad to see it all coming to an end; across most of the country, the atmosphere remained calm, with a perceptible sense of voter fatigue.

Late on the night of September 3, when a marathon see-saw tabulation of votes finally revealed that the JLP had won 31 seats, PSM delivered a defiant speech at PNP headquarters in which she:

-- vehemently claimed that "as of now, we're conceding no victory to the Jamaica Labour Party;"

-- said the nation must await the results of the official recount of votes by the EOJ over coming days;

-- accused the JLP of having violated the rules by campaigning the day before the election;

-- claimed that in some constituencies people had been barred from voting;

-- in an apparent allusion to a legal challenge to the nomination of JLP candidates allegedly having sworn allegiance to a foreign power (allegedly the U.S.)-- which, under the Constitution, eventually could lead to their disqualification (reftels A,B)-- maintained that "we will pursue action in the courts on some constitutional issues;"

-- vituperatively asserted that "we're not going to stand by and allow criminals to decide the future of the Jamaican people."

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Golding appeals for "constructive engagement"  
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6.(SBU) The contrast hardly could have been greater when, shortly before midnight, Bruce Golding addressed jubilant supporters at JLP headquarters. The prospective PM:

-- pointed out that "however perplexing some may find the results, the fact is that the people have spoken;"

-- recognized that many seats had been won or lost by thin margins, and that recounts would be necessary;

-- said his government would pursue a policy of "constructive engagement," and encouraged his supporters to reach out to the PNP;

-- projected an image of reconciliation and flexibility.

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An Election marred by violence --  
but on balance, a win for Jamaican democracy  
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7.(SBU) Although tarnished by tragic incidents of violence with alleged political overtones, by the standards of Jamaica's volatile political history, on balance the 2007 election has been comparatively free, fair, and peaceful. Following an ominous up tick of shootings over the last week, on September 3 and 4:

-- seven violent deaths were reported nationwide;

-- gunfire was reported in chronically troubled areas of metropolitan Kingston, including Mountain View, Woodford Park, and Windward Road, with two soldiers shot when a police patrol came under fire;

-- scuffles and stone throwing were reported in Northwest Clarendon;

-- the PNP candidate in Northeast Manchester, Paul Lyn, claimed to have been assaulted, and called on the Political Ombudsman to nullify the results from three polling stations in that constituency;

-- some delays at polling stations and discrepancies in voter lists were reported;

-- an empty ballot box in Northeast St. Ann reportedly was stolen from the vehicle of a presiding officer.

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Analysis: PSM's magnetic charisma could not make up for missed opportunities  
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8.(SBU) Throughout her long career, PSM has capitalized on magnetic charisma and populist appeal as the "mother of the nation." However, since winning a bitter internecine party struggle to succeed the outgoing P.J. Patterson as PNP Leader and PM in March, 2006, she has seen her support gradually dwindle as she has missed a number of key opportunities:

(A) Observers across the political spectrum believe that, when she became PM, she missed a golden opportunity by not calling new elections straightaway, when her approval ratings approached 80 percent, and she easily could have won a resounding victory; once in office, her overwhelming popularity was bound to diminish. In mid-2007, her decision to opt for a lengthy July-August election campaign- during the height of the hurricane season- proved another serious mistake.

(B) PSM could have turned a succession of campaign finance, telecoms licensing, contracting, and other assorted scandals to her advantage by using them as an opportunity to clean house and ditch disreputable ministers and cronies, thus displaying strength and a determination to reform a culture of pervasive corruption. Instead, she allowed these imbroglios to erode her support.

(C) In a nationally broadcast debate against Golding on August 11, PSM came across as ill-prepared and disoriented, thus probably putting off undecided voters.

(D) When Hurricane Dean struck Jamaica, necessitating postponement of the August 27 Election Date (reftels A,B), she could have seized the day to display decisive leadership of the recovery effort,

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compassion for the distressed, and an adroit rescheduling of the elections. The widespread perception was of disarray and dissention among her Cabinet.

(E) Finally, by refusing to concede defeat graciously on September 3, she may have missed a chance to exit on a positive note as a charismatic populist PM with heartfelt concern for the welfare of ordinary Jamaicans. (Note: she may have one more chance for this when the results of the official recount are in. End Note.)

9.(SBU) The JLP victory represents a sea change in Jamaica's political direction; for reasons delineated Reftel (C), the coming weeks may prove pivotal in shaping bilateral relations for years to come. Via septels, in coming days post will provide additional analysis of:

(A) the composition of the new Cabinet and the shape of things to come under a prospective JLP government;

(B) the PNP as an opposition party.

JOHNSON